



**B**athing has been around for a long time, because people have always had a desire to get clean. Even before soap was invented, people would wash with water in streams or rivers. However, the water only washed away dirt. It could not dissolve the oily residue and grime that built up over time.

The first people to write about using soap to bathe were the Egyptians in about 1500 BC. Egyptians made soap from animal and vegetable oils that were mixed with alkaline salts such as sodium carbonate. The goopy mixture worked relatively well for cleaning, and for treating skin diseases. The Egyptians bathed regularly, and are believed to have been quite clean.

However, there is an earlier record of soap making. Researchers have found small amounts of a soap-like material in clay jars from the ruins of the ancient city of Babylon. The material was made in about 2800 BC, 1300 years before the Egyptians. Writing on the outside of the jars says that the material was made by boiling animal fats with ashes, and that it was used for hair styling.

The Greeks preferred not to use soap to clean themselves. Instead, they would scrub their skin with blocks of clay, sand, pumice and ashes to remove dirt and grime. They would then anoint themselves with oil, and scrape it away with a knife-like blade called a strigil. The Greeks did use soap, but only to wash their clothes in the stream.

Around 312 BC, soap regained popularity with the construction of the first Roman baths. The ancient Romans built huge public baths that were filled with water from man-made canals that carried water from nearby rivers into Roman cities. The Romans invented indoor plumbing using lead pipes. In fact, the word “plumbing” comes from the Roman word for lead—plumbum.

But alas, when the Roman Empire fell in 467 AD, people in Europe stopped bathing. People were dirty, their food was unclean, and their homes were unsanitary. During the Middle Ages, many people became very sick. Because people did not clean themselves or their homes well, health plagues were common. In 1347 AD, Italian traders spread the bubonic plague from China to Europe. In just five years, the “Black Death”, as it was called, killed one-third of Europe’s population.

It wasn’t until the 17th century that cleanliness came back into style, but soap was considered a luxury item. Most people simply could not afford it. During this time, soap makers guarded their formulas carefully, and the governments of Europe placed a high tax on soap. It wasn’t until the 19th century that soap became an affordable item for most people.

Early pioneers in the United States used lye soap to clean. Lye soap was hard to make, and it was very harsh on the skin. However, it was cheap, and materials to make it

were easy to find. To make lye soap, pioneers would mix lye with oil. The lye came from ashes, and the oil that they used usually came from pig fat, or tallow. To make lye, they would pour water over ashes from a fireplace. Then they collected the water, and filtered it. The ashes would not dissolve in the water, but the lye would. To obtain oil, the pioneers would heat pig fat in a large pot until all of the oil was released. The oil was then boiled, and the scum that collected on the top was scraped off and discarded. The oil and the water containing lye were combined, and lye soap resulted. The process often took days, and the lye soap was so harsh that it burned the pioneers’ eyes and skin.

We have come a long way since the days of the Egyptians. Today, finding a bar of soap is as easy as going to the store. There is no need to make your own. Modern soaps are gentler on your skin, and they clean better than ever before. Some soaps even contain lotions and perfumes to make your skin soft and to keep you smelling fresh. We’ve got it easy these days, and it is all because of good chemistry!

